

How to deal with the Western Balkans

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Abstract

At the turn of the last century, outward tranquillity was bestowed upon the Western Balkans, the most volatile and troublesome part of the European continent. The termination of large scale violence, however, did not add up to long-term stability in the region. Its political elites have proven to be incapable and/or unwilling to resolve their differences among themselves and peacefully in order to provide for the region's security. The management of the most burning problems in the Western Balkans would be best assured within the process of European integration. With active and well-coordinated roles played by key international organizations, the Western Balkans could eventually be transformed into a region of security, democracy, and prosperity.

Key words: Western Balkans, Balkanization, Kosovo, security, international community, UN, OSCE, EU, NATO.

Recent political tensions in and related to Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia, and Bosnia & Herzegovina have again attracted attention to the Western Balkans in the media and important international bodies (UN, OSCE, EU, NATO). The purpose of this article is to elucidate the Balkans' manifold complexity, its conflict potential, the recent geopolitical shifts in and around the region, the controversial problem of Kosovo, its international implications and the lessons that could be drawn from of the international community's dealing with the volatile Western Balkans.

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General characteristics of the region

During the last two centuries, the Western Balkans have rightly earned the distinction of the most volatile and troublesome part of the European continent. Throughout the XXth century local armed conflicts and coalition wars with continental implications, terrorism, uprisings, revolutions, *coups d'état*, mass expulsion of population, outright genocide, and other forms of violence have at almost regular intervals punctured the periods of regional peace. After four decades of relative calm, the latest bouts of bloody violence and wars in the region took place again in 1990-1995 and in 1998-1999.¹

The former of the two upsurges was largely triggered by otherwise positive developments – by the end of the “Cold War”, the breakdown of communist regimes and by the ensuing transition of Eastern Europe to more democratic political systems and market economies. The Western Balkans have once again shown high sensitivity to the shifts in the balance of power among major extraregional actors. In these respects the Balkans have differed very appreciably from all other regions in Europe, including the Northern half of former Eastern Europe. Not incidentally, the geopolitical fault line stretching from South-Eastern Europe eastward all the way to the Pacific was branded by Z. Brzezinski the “Euroasian Balkans”.²

The geopolitical instability in the Balkans has deep historical roots. More than a millennium of numerous incursions, conquests, and migrations created a unique and most heterogenous mixture of peoples and ethnic groups speaking different languages and professing different religions in the Balkans.³ South Eastern Europe overlaps partly with the Mediterranean, Central Europe, Pannonian and the Black Sea

¹ Blank, Stephen J. (ed.), *Yugoslavia's wars: The problem from hell*, Carlisle, Pa, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1995, Chapters 2, 3, 5, 6

² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, Basic Books, 1997, New York, Chapter 3 ‘Euroasian Balkans’, pp. 7-25, 29-45, 99-108

³ Johnsen, William T., *Deciphering the Balkan enigma: Using History to Inform Policy*, Carlisle, Pa, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1995, Chapters 2 in 3, pp. 9-60

regions. The central part of South Eastern Europe, the Balkans, have for many centuries been divided between several empires, with extra regional centres of power. They have therefore never become a viable and coherent region in the cultural, economic, or political sense. Its present name was invented about three and a half centuries ago by outsiders, German geographers, who mis-used the Turkish word for "mountain." After four centuries of Ottoman domination and their withdrawal from most of their former European possessions, the Balkans has become a complicated, political mosaic, which clearly lacks its own centre of gravity. The recent disintegration of ex-Yugoslavia in 1991-1992 has greatly increased the number of states in the Western Balkans. The proclamation of Kosovo's independence was the latest development in this direction. However, the potential for further political fragmentation in the region, largely following the ethnic-national lines, has not been fully exhausted, in spite of the general disapproval of 'Balkanization' by major powers. Smaller states which resulted from the breakdown are today much less heterogeneous from the ethnic, religious, and cultural view-points than had been the SFR of Yugoslavia. Serbia, Croatia, and Kosovo have also become ethnically and culturally more homogeneous within their own boundaries.

The dramatic change, wars, and other developments since the late 1980s have caused huge economic dislocation and damage to the region.⁴ The Western Balkans still have not reached the pre-1991 levels of industrial and agricultural production. In some parts of the region war losses, dislocation of human and natural resources, the breakdown of previously integrated transportation and energy systems, economic fragmentation and the loss of markets, wiped out the positive results of up to three decades of the preceding economic progress. The very uneven damage to their economies has greatly increased the disparities between the most and the least prosperous parts of the region. The intraregional differentials in

⁴ Altmann, Franz-Lothar, *Regional economic problems and prospects in The Western Balkans: Moving on*, Chaillot Paper no.70, Paris, Institute for Security Studies, 2004, p.p.69 - 84

GNP per capita and in the level of unemployment inside have gone up tremendously. Huge disparities inside the same region inevitably feed illegal trafficking and organized crime. It is estimated, for example, that about eighty percent of heroin is being smuggled to the EU area from/via the Balkans. Social instability, economic difficulties and political unrest have very significantly contributed to the continuity of negative national and religious stereotypes created and maintained by the generations-long indoctrination with historical myths.⁵ Interethnic tensions have been further magnified by modern mass media, manipulated and exploited by ruthless politicians. The traumatic history of the region has thus served as a powerful tool for mass mobilization with nationalist, religious and xenophobic slogans. All this has led to the most tragic results in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo.

The present security situation in the Balkans

The tectonic geopolitical shifts in the early 1990s and the crisis of neutralism and nonalignment led to a radical political and military realignment in the Balkans and also in the region's relations with external powers. With the greatly reduced Russian influence, and the total eclipse of the shortly-lived Chinese political presence in Albania, practically the entire region has become oriented towards the West. As the region also lacks mineral, energy, or other resources on a large scale, its geopolitical importance has relatively decreased. The Balkans has furthermore ceased to be an object of overt contests for political and military control or domination by external powers. The extra-regional sources of conflict in, over, or about the Balkans have been therefore greatly reduced. Most importantly, the Balkans are not anymore Europe's powderkeg as they were in 1914, and instead gained in international notoriety as a source of incessant trouble and as a costly nuisance. On the other hand, the geopolitical shifts have also

⁵ Batt, Judy, *Introduction: the stabilisation/integration dilemma* in *The Western Balkans: Moving on*, Chaillot Paper no.70, Paris, Institute for Security Studies, 2004, p.p. 7 - 19

greatly diminished the big powers' positive motivation to provide international assistance to the region.

Since June 1999, outward tranquility has been imposed on the Western Balkans. After several unsuccessful attempts by UN, CSCE/OSCE and EEC/EU⁶, this highly positive change was achieved primarily by NATO. The Western powers, after considerable hesitation, had decided then to intervene in the Balkans, politically and militarily. The end of armed conflict in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, and Macedonia was followed by the advances of competitive political democracy. Albeit this political change has remained largely superficial. The tranquility in the region has been preserved since 1996 by several *de facto* international protectorates over its parts. These systems of external surveillance and assistance in several potential trouble spots have included the stationing of peace-keeping and stabilization troops, the presence of international police, armed and unarmed observers, judges, ombudsmen, administrative overseers etc.

As noted earlier, the termination of the East-West political and military rivalry in the Balkans has had, security-wise, both negative and positive consequences. The suppression of armed violence by superior force did not add up to long-term regional stability, as was recently manifested in Kosovo, Serbia, and Macedonia. The security situation in the Western Balkans still remains precarious and we observe in the region a combination of old sources of tensions and some new positive developments since the early 1990's. Under the veneer of tranquility some serious political and security problems still persist in the Western Balkans:

- the presence of intolerance, pathological nationalism and xenophobia;
- underdeveloped democratic political culture, lacking the art of compromise;
- several varieties of non-military threats to regional

⁶ Burg, L. Steven, Negotiating a settlement: lessons of the diplomatic process in Yugoslavia's wars: **The problem from hell**, 1995, p.p. 47 - 86

security and stability (ill- governance, corruption, organized crime, illegal trafficking in arms, drugs, human beings etc.);

- unresolved political problems of interstate borders and minorities;
- the humanitarian problem of well over a million refugees and displaced persons.

Many attempts have been made in the past to create region-wide webs of security in the Balkans. These included two Balkans defense pacts, one in the 1930s and the other in the 1950s. The first failed miserably while the second – the Balkan pact between Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey signed in August 1954 – never became a reality. So far none of the regionally generated initiatives and undertakings has proven viable, largely because they have never led to sustained political activity on a regional basis. Moreover, all Balkans initiatives have, as a rule, lacked the support and active involvement by the public, mass media, and civil society.

A more promising approach to cure the instability in the region has manifested itself in the efforts to induce and infuse from outside economic, political and security cooperation with and among all Balkans states.⁷ These efforts have resulted from the 1980s in a web of ties among these states and between them and a number of international organizations. This web has been almost exclusively Western in origin and included such nets as the “Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe”, CEFTA, SECI, NATO’s “Partnership for Peace”, “South East Europe Initiative”, “South East Europe Security Cooperation Steering Group” et. al. The European Union has promoted and supported regional integration in the Western Balkans by concluding several types of cooperation, stabilization and association agreements. The agreements have served as preliminary steps in bringing closer to and hopefully eventually admitting all remaining Balkan states into the ranks of its future members. This strategy of staged integration has been

⁷ Delevic, Milica, *Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans*, Chaillot Paper no.104, Paris, Institute for Security Studies, 2007, Ch.2,3, pp. 31-72

successfully practiced earlier with two other groups of former Eastern European states - the Visegrad group and the three Baltic republics.

However, the nets involving the Balkans states have been overly dependent on outside donors, mostly understaffed, poorly interconnected, and coordinated. Despite these shortcomings, a few of them have proven to be effective. In addition, some of these nets have partly blocked one another. For example, the EU enlargement has undermined the previously existing free trade and visa-free regimes and in fact erected new interstate barriers in the region. The EU visa rules and the extension of the Schengen regime have created considerable problems on the practical level which have hampered the movement of persons, economic, and cultural cooperation in the region. There has also been a conceptual incongruity between the "Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe" and the "Stabilization and Association Process" conducted by the European Union.

The Kosovo problem and its international implications

Kosovo's proclamation of independence on February 17, 2008 and the birth of the youngest European state have highlighted the salience of historically generated sources of intraregional tensions and conflicts in the region.⁸

In late XIX c. - early XX c. Kosovo was a minor chapter in the wider Albanian question within the Ottoman Empire. Kosovo, as a separate and potentially volatile issue, was created in 1912-1913 by the Kingdom of Serbia and the Russian Empire with the assistance of other great European powers. Prior to 1912 Serbia, Greece and Montenegro had, for many years, conspired with the Russian Empire to prevent the appearance of an independent Albanian state on the ruins of the Ottoman's possessions in the Western Balkans. According to their

⁸ Delevic, Milica, *The Kosovo problem in a regional perspective in The Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, Chaillot Paper no.10*, Paris, Institute for Security Studies, 2007, p.p.79 - 82

coordinated plans, the three Orthodox states were to occupy and partition the lands with the majority Albanian population thus forestalling an Albanian declaration of independence. Consequently, the Serbian army invaded Kosovo in 1912 on its way to conquer Northern Albania and its main port Durres. However, Serbia's plans to gain by force a permanent territorial access to the Mediterranean sea were foiled by Austro-Hungary and Italy. In 1913 bowing to an Austro-Hungarian ultimatum the Serbian Army hesitantly withdrew from Northern Albania. The European powers - Great Britain, France, Germany, Austro-Hungary, and Italy, at Russia's insistence, allowed Serbia and Montenegro to retain the already occupied Eastern parts of the Ottoman possessions inhabited predominately by the Albanians, other Muslims, and Slavic Macedonians.⁹ These lands (the Sandzhak of Novi Pazar, today's Kosovo and Western Macedonia) were absorbed by Serbia without a properly executed annexation. The new Serbian possessions were incorporated in 1918-1919 into the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes¹⁰ which was later renamed into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Between the two World Wars the problem of Kosovo had been a destabilizing internal political and security issue which contributed to the first Yugoslavia's disintegration in 1941. It continued to create considerable internal troubles also in the second, post-1945 communist Yugoslavia. After the latter's demise in 1991-1992, the Kosovo problem was, for several years, totally ignored by the international community and reappeared only in 1997-1998 as an unresolved regional political problem; the last vestige of Yugoslavia's succession wars.

The Kosovo issue has maintained, at its core, a political conflict between the Kosovar Albanians' desire for national emancipation and self-determination, and on the other hand, Serbia's endeavors to continue ruling the land from Belgrade.

⁹ Kola, Paulin, *The search for greater Albania*, Hurst & Company, London, 2003, pp. 10-18

¹⁰ Noel, Malcolm, *Kosovo, A Short History*, London, Macmillan, 1998, pp. 43-50, 61-63, 129-256, 289-294, 314-316

For the Serbian cultural and political elites, Kosovo has been a cherished symbol of Serbia's past glory. Following the NATO intervention in March-June 1999, the Serbian rule over Kosovo was abruptly terminated, and was never peacefully reestablished. The re-imposition by armed force under present political climate in Europe is out of the question. A compromise in the form Kosovo's wide autonomy within Serbia had been enshrined by the last SFRY constitution of 1974. This historic compromise was however effectively annulled by the Milosevic regime in 1989. This brutal unilateral act by Serbia accompanied by the presence of tanks in the streets of Pristina, grossly violated the Yugoslav constitutional order. Moreover, the Yugoslav military and Serbian police committed numerous crimes against the Kosovar Albanians and other Muslims in Kosovo in 1989-1999, including: e.g. causing the deaths of at least 10,000 Kosovars. According to the UNHCR statistics, about 350,000 persons, mostly Albanians, were forced by Serbian authorities to leave Kosovo in 1998, and nearly 1.5 million by June 1999.¹¹

Since the summer of 1999, Kosovo had been a NATO protectorate and a *de facto*, mostly self-governing country under a UN mandate, fully separate and independent from Serbia. During this period Kosovo had developed a different political and economic system and adopted a different currency.¹² During these years, the economic, social, and political situation in Kosovo had significantly improved. This progress was due to international assistance (around 21% GNP), and the Kosovars' remittances from abroad (roughly 15% of GNP). Gross national product **per capita** in Kosovo has quadrupled to today's approximate € 1000 p.c. It remains, however, twice lower than in the neighbouring Balkans states, while poverty (about 45% of the population) and very high unemployment still prevail (well over 40%, and about 70% among females and youth). The international community spends, on its regular activities in Kosovo, about € 2 billion annually, although

¹¹ Kola, Paulin, *The search for greater Albania*, Hurst & Company, London, 2003, p.p. 363

¹² Altmann, Franz-Lothar, *The status of Kosovo in What status for Kosovo?*, Chaillot Paper no. 50, Paris, Institute for Security Studies, 2001, p.p. 19 - 32

mostly on maintaining security and on remuneration of its representatives. Only a small fraction of these funds (5-8%) flows directly into Kosovo's economy.

The problem of Kosovo's status was formally resolved by a unilateral declaration of independence, with a tacit approval of US and major EU members. This action was carried out, however, without a prior UN Security Council resolution approving Martti Ahtisaari's recommendation, but also without a condemnation of, let alone annulling Kosovo's independence, as Serbia demanded. The essentials of M. Ahtisaari's recommendation (commissioned by the UN Secretary General) are nevertheless being implemented by Kosovo's democratically elected authorities with the assistance provided by a large EU mission called EULEX. This mission started operating on June 15, 2008, when the new constitution of Kosovo came into effect. Its legality has been claimed by the Western powers under the existing UNSC Resolution 1244, and challenged by the Russian Federation. As the UN mandate was not terminated due to disagreements in the Security Council the presence of UNMIK, OSCE, and NATO has continued under the resolution. The political problem of Kosovo, therefore, remains on Europe's agenda in addition to its wider geopolitical reverberations.

Today, Kosovo represents only one of the numerous political conflicts in the world that is closely related to the ethnic, national, linguistic, cultural, and religious divides within sovereign states. In the Euro-Atlantic area alone these problems span from Quebec, Greenland, Scotland, Ulster, Catalunya, and Basque country in Spain, Belgium, Corsica in France, to Slovakia, Estonia, Western Ukraine, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Western Macedonia, Eastern Moldova, Southern Russia and Cyprus. Further to the East the ethnically related trouble spots include Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia in Georgia, Nagorni Karabakh, Palestine, and Northern Iraq. This chain of political instability stretches all the way to Tibet, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Indonesia. The total number of similar problems threatening the stability of multiethnic and multireligious states in Africa is also high. Each of these conflicts has been dealt with (or ignored) by the international community separately. Thus,

the solution of Kosovo's status need not create a spill-over effect and/or be replicated elsewhere. It was unnecessary for the Russian Federation to cite the recognition of Kosovo's independence by the West as justification for recognizing Abkhazia's and Southern Osetia's independence. In these three, only in some respects similar developments both the Russian Federation and most EU and NATO member states acted inconsequentially in honouring the principle of self-determination in one case and rejecting it in the other(s).

Since the end of the 'Cold War' there have been close to two dozen changes of internationally recognized borders in the Euro-Atlantic area, mostly without a UN Security Council approval. Each of these changes - in Germany, former Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union took its own course. The political effects of the new interstate borders has mostly positively affected European security. The same could be eventually expected from adjusting Kosovo's legal status *vis-a-vis* Serbia to the *de facto* situation since 1999, and from the new interstate border between Serbia and Kosovo, once the relations between the two states are normalized.

International community facing the Western Balkans

The Balkans' political elites have proven time and time again their unwillingness and/or inability to reach agreements on conflictual issues by mutual accommodation and compromise. This fundamental feature has been demonstrated, i.a. in the longstanding Greek-Macedonian dispute over the constitutional name of Macedonia and in the Serbian-Kosovar Albanian negotiations on the status of Kosovo. When involved in conflicts with their neighbors, the Balkan elites usually strive to embroil outside powers instead of trying to solve the problems bilaterally or within a regional framework. Mainly for this reason the recent Balkan conflicts stimulated political and military involvement by four permanent members of the UN Security Council (US, UK, France, and the Russian Federation). The Balkan conflicts have also been, almost continuously, on the agendas of the UN, CSCE/OSCE, EEC/EU, NATO, and the Council of Europe,

apparently contributing to the already existing divisions and antagonisms among the great powers.¹³ The Kosovo problem has served as a source or a pretext for interstate tensions, notably between the USA, major EU members, the Russian Federation, and Serbia.

The Kosovo problem posed a serious challenge to NATO's political cohesion in 1998-1999. The Alliance was able then to soften the differences among its members and to reach a consensus concerning the pending forceful military action against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in March of 1999. Nine years later the question of Kosovo's status has again divided the EU and NATO. A majority of their members has accepted M. Ahtisaari's recommendation as the least bad of all available alternatives and consequently recognized Kosovo's independence. A minority of EU and NATO members, notably Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Slovakia and Romania have remained, so far, closer to Serbia's rejectionist position. The disagreements among the EU members were more visible in 2008 than were the discords among the EEC members in 1991 concerning the recognition of Slovenia's and Croatia's independence. This comparison does not speak well for the coherence of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy fifteen years after its official launching in 1993.

The international record of dealing with the sources of instability and insecurity in the Western Balkans has highlighted the importance of:

- clear understanding and realistic appreciation of the complexity of problems in the Western Balkans which defy quick unidimensional solutions;
- the previously underestimated interconnection between the security in the region and the security in other parts of the continent;
- a robust and well-coordinated international action to improve the economic and social situation in the region and to repair and develop its infrastructure;

¹³ Sophia, Clement, *The International Community response in Conflict Prevention in the Balkans*, (Chaillot Paper no. 30), Paris, Institute for Security Studies, 1997, p.p. 46-74

- the great contribution to conflict management and stabilization in the Western Balkans made by NATO and EU members (France, UK, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Greece), and also by some non-members, including the Russian Federation and Ukraine;
- the fundamental need for consensus among and coordinated actions by Western powers, particularly by USA and EU members states;
- the need for a rational division of labor and effective coordination of activities between numerous international actors operating in and/or dealing with the region (UN, OSCE, NATO, EU, Contact group, etc.); and also between various programs conducted under their sponsorship;
- avoiding the danger of a vicious circle of dependency on the presence of foreign peace-keepers (as was in Cyprus) and the adoption of a realistic exit strategy for them.

These observations are relevant also in the case of the youngest Balkan state. Having become an independent country, Kosovo ought to join the activities of several international organizations and regional interstate networks in the Western Balkans. Kosovo's joining these bodies will have beneficial effects on the overall security situation in the Balkans. After all, the more overlapping Balkan institutions that exist and function, the better it is for the region and for the whole Euro-Atlantic community. The EU-supported "South-East European Cooperation Process" (SEECP) has fostered multifaceted cooperation among the states of the Western Balkan. Its successor—the "Regional Cooperation Council," with the seat of its Secretariat in Sarajevo will hopefully continue with success this laudable effort. All states aspiring to become members of the European Union and/or of NATO have been warned that their admission into these organizations are conditional on their commitment to fulfill constructively their responsibilities in the region. The implementation of this injunction would certainly help to promote regional cooperation.¹⁴

¹⁴ Van Meurs, Wim (ed.), *Prospects and Risks Beyond EU Enlargement, Southeastern Europe: Weak States and Strong International Support*, Opladen, Leske + Budrich, 2003, pp. 16-20

A note of caution ought to be added concerning the general proposition that the management of Balkan problems would be best assured within the framework of European integration.¹³ The rejection of the 'Treaty on a constitution for new Europe' by French and Dutch voters indicated i.e. the rather wide-spread resistance in the older member states to further EU enlargement to Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Thus, the question of the so-called EU "absorption capacity" ought to be realistically reviewed in a new light. It is questionable whether in the near future EU will be willing and able to implement, in full, the Thesaloniki commitments to the Western Balkans states. A substantial scaling down and delaying the implementation of these undertakings by EU has become a distinct possibility.

Conclusion

The above-presented review of the problems in and related to the Western Balkans leads to the question of how to deal with the Western Balkans? First of all, the Western Balkans countries should be actively encouraged to further develop and strengthen the existing ties among themselves by forming pragmatic regional networks of cooperation in practical matters. On the other hand, one could not realistically expect the Balkan countries to overcome the persisting sources of internal instability in the region entirely by their own efforts. The Balkan elites, if left alone, are simply incapable of transforming the region into a viable and peaceful community of nations even distantly comparable e.g. to Scandinavia.

The international community's ability to manage numerous problems in the Western Balkans could be best improved by the further strengthening of the European Union's and of NATO's presence and influence in the area. This extension and upgrading should be done in cooperation with the UN, OSCE, Council of Europe, the World Bank, EBRD, etc. Moreover, international military and police presence in several neuralgic spots (particularly in Kosovo) will be needed for many years. The qualitative transformation of the region should be firmly imbedded in the broader European integration process.

Association and partnership arrangements as well as EU and NATO membership ought to be extended to all worthy and aspiring candidates, preventing the appearance of new lines of division within the region.

This has been one of Slovenia's main objectives during its presidency in the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2008. During these six months, there was indeed progress in this direction, including the extension of stabilization and association agreements, which now cover the entire region, except Kosovo. The process of EU and NATO enlargement is expected to transform the Western Balkans into a desired space of democracy, economic and cultural dynamism, prosperity, and security.

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